

Mother Jones: Mother of the Downtrodden

Hanane Goelzer

Washington Gifted School, Peoria

Teacher: Mindy Juriga and J. Tracy Prescott

Mary Harris Jones lived through many hardships including famine, epidemics, fire, and poverty, but she only got stronger and more independent. She was born in the 1830s to a poor family of seven in Inchigeelagh, Ireland. Her family emigrated to Canada where her illiterate parents made an unusual effort to keep her in school until she was seventeen years old. Jones had her first experience with labor unions when she moved to Memphis to marry George Jones, who was a factory worker. As the yellow fever epidemic spread through Tennessee, her husband and four children died, and she left the Irish and African American strikers of Memphis for Chicago. Due to the large number of laborers working in horrible conditions in Illinois in the late eighteen hundreds, many strikes occurred, several of which were started by the motivated and independent Mary Harris Jones.

Jones first came to Chicago as many immigrants did, looking for work. She had experience as a seamstress and a teacher, but she opted for the first choice. Though she was skilled, she kept being reminded that her class would never change. The wealthy would make their own little world and ignore all the people too poor to be part of it. The lower class resented them, and it fueled many strikes in Chicago. Mary Harris Jones settled in a neighborhood near to the somewhat infamous Mrs. O'Leary. In 1871, her cow supposedly started the Great Chicago Fire and Jones, along with most of Chicago's other citizens, had to flee to the lake. When the fire was put out, she returned to find she had lost everything. And to make it worse, the people with hard feelings towards the Irish had something else to hold against them.

In the ruins of Chicago, the Knights of Labor started meeting in a burned down building. Mary Harris Jones started volunteering as a labor organizer after one meeting. Immigration was the center of the movement as the United States was changing from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. Immigrants and displaced farmers came to work in the horrible conditions and starvation wages of Chicago's factories and sweat-shops. Mary Jones's role was very important; she held educational meetings to boost the laborers' spirits, led hunger marches, and organized the striking armies of tramps. The Chicago authorities responded to strikes with intimidation and violence and were supported by the *Chicago Tribune*, who suggested the strikers be handled like rodents, with strychnine and arsenic. An unfortunate example of their incompetence was the incident at Haymarket Square in Chicago. While the police was breaking up a strike, a bomb was thrown and many people were killed or injured. Authorities rounded up the leading radicals and hundreds were beaten, questioned, or detained. The number of laborers in unions immediately declined by seventy-five percent and strikes became smaller and more narrow. Mary Harris Jones remembered it as a formative moment and changed her birth date to May 1 to honor it.

In the 1880s Jones left the Knights of Labor and started working for the millions of mistreated miners. Illinois was where some of the United States' first coal was discovered and where the first mining operation took place in the 1800s. There were more than 5,000 mines in all of Illinois. The mining towns themselves were problematic. They were completely isolated so the owner controlled everything, including the conditions. More than 50,000 miners died in forty years from industrial accidents, disease, and the conditions inside the mines. Soon to be the largest, most powerful union,

the United Mine Workers met Mary Harris Jones when she was not in any particular union. She was their most charismatic organizer, and though she lost as often as she won, the United Mine Workers went up by thirty percent. She lived with the workers in their tents and made them like family, visiting them at home and in the mines. One of the reasons for Jones's fame was her efficient strike techniques. Women were usually not allowed in mines because of superstition, but she told the men to stay home and the women and children would strike as they were motivating and less prone to imprisonment.

Mary Harris Jones heard much about the children working twelve-hour days in sweatshops and factories, but she did not believe how bad it was until she worked in a mill herself. Jones showed her outrage at child labor in the first article she wrote, and led children in strikes and hoped to ultimately stop them from working. One of the obstacles she met in Chicago was the number of unemployed willing to work. There was also much violence in attempts to stop the strikes and many people were killed. The biggest strike she helped organize in her life was a nationwide strike with 300,000 people, of which 40,000 were Chicagoans. Mary Harris Jones died on November 30, 1930, seven months after her one-hundredth birthday. She was buried in the United Mine Workers' cemetery at Mt. Olive, Illinois, and kept rebellion going even after her death. Strikers from the United Mine Workers would walk off their jobs and march to her grave. Due to the large amount of laborers working in horrible conditions in Illinois in the late eighteen hundreds, many strikes occurred, several of which were started by the motivated and independent Mary Harris Jones. The name Mary Harris Jones, however, had stopped being used by nineteen-hundred, and she was referred to only as Mother Jones. With the

change of name, her fame spread, as it symbolized her being the mother of the downtrodden. The role of Mother Jones freed her because women of that era led quiet, homebound, family devoted lives. Women, especially elderly ones, were not supposed to be politically active. Mary Harris Jones did more for Illinois than just participate in strikes; she helped found the Social Democratic Party, was present at the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World, and organized millions of striking workers. [From Elliot J. Gorn, *Mother Jones*; Elliot J. Gorn, "Mother Jones: The Woman," *Mary Harris Jones* May/June 2001; "Jones, Mary Harris (Mother)," *American Women's History* Dec. 1, 2000; "*Mother*" *Harris Jones Biography*. 25 Jan. 2008. Lakewood Public Library. <<http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/jone-mar.htm>>. (Sept. 9, 2008); and *Mother Jones: The Miners' Angel*. 2003. Illinois Labor History Society. <<http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/majones.htm>>. (Sept. 29, 2008).]